

James L. Holly, M.D.

Northwestern State University and the Long Purple Line Part II

By James L. Holly, MD

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The Drama in Mr. Graham's Speech Class Continues

After tossing the chalk into the air, I asked, "What made the chalk fall to the floor?" I answered my own question, saying, "You think it's gravity, but it is the little green people. They live in the air and are cleaning their homes." I then gave a fifteen-minute speech on the little green people. I had one in my pocket which others could not see because they didn't believe in them. Part of my speech was a brief dialogue with my invisible friend, one of the little green people.

After the class, Mr. Graham would give you your grade. Shamelessly, I asked. He showed me his grade book. I had an A- with a question mark. I asked about the question mark and he said, "It was excellent, but it want to know when you prepared it?" I smiled, shrugged and walked out. My then wife-to-be remembers it the same way.

Three weeks later, we were assigned an extemporaneous speech. A student would stand in front of the class, Mr. Graham would give the topic and off the top of the student's head, a speech had to be given. I could have argued that I had already done that. When my turn came, Mr. Graham gave me the subject "alarm clock." Before "-ock" was out of his mouth, I said, "In 1783, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, John Smith first conceived of combining a timing device with an alarming device..." At this point, Mr. Graham interrupted and said, "Stop! Stop! Stop! You know too much about alarm clocks," which comment made me start laughing.

He said. "You made that up!" I nodded yes and he turned bright red! He then said, "OK, Mr. Smarter-than-your-Pants, give me a speech on the hole in the doughnut." Through experience I knew a great deal more about doughnuts than alarm clocks so I gave him the speech. Sitting in that class was the young lady with whom I would spend the next 51 years. At that moment neither of us knew of our future together.

Northwestern and Jackie Smith

In the fall and spring of 1962-1963 another permanent connection with Northwestern, me and my wife was forged. For NFL football fans the name Jackie Smith is a NFL Hall of Fame legend. He changed the way his position was played and was a tour de force in his era of play. In 1962, there was a fifteen-year old boy, who was not a great athlete but who had the privilege of watching the 18-year old Jackie Smith training for the high hurdles in track and field when Jackie was a freshman at NSU and the boy was a junior in high school. With a video-tape memory, this boy remembers watching Jackie Smith “step” over the high hurdles as the boy remembers that he thought that the high hurdles was a pole-vault event, or at least a high jump; but Jackie “stepped” over them and he did it at a high rate of speed.

After his freshman year at Texas A&M this young man, now 18, returned to NSU as a sophomore. To his surprise, he and Jackie were taking a course together and they studied together. They played paddle ball and the boy remembers bouncing off Jackie as the ball bounced off the walls of the court. By now, you know that this boy was me. I have thought of Jackie many times since those early years. I watched him play on TV and was proud to have known him, however briefly. I remember his athleticism, strength and speed, but mostly I remember that he was an incredibly kind person and he was always a gentleman.

On January 26, 2016, I talked to Jackie for the first time in fifty-three years. He was as nice as I remembered him. I felt like a kid again, enjoying the attention of a hero. I hope that Jackie and I can enjoy a meal together but even if we don't, today's visit was special to me. In 2000, Jackie was honored with the highest award Northwestern can confer upon an alumnus; he was elected to The Long Purple Line. And, in March of this year, that 15-year old boy, who watched him in awe, will join him in that honor. This will be an incredible experience for an ordinary athlete who simply loved to run and who remembers one who could run like the wind and who could also clear the way of any humans who stood in his way.

NSU's Greatest Gift to Me

The greatest gift Northwestern gave me was an introduction to my wife. Carolyn Bellue and I became great friends but did not date. In the summer of 1964, the Louisiana Baptist Convention through the Northwestern Baptist Student Union (BSU) sent me to Kenya, East Africa in a Summer Missionary program. That was a wonderful experience. Carolyn's father sent me twenty dollars for the trip. Traveling back through Israel, I bought Carolyn a Mother-of-Pearl New Testament and wrote in it, “Dear Sis,” as at that time she was only like a sister to me. When I gave it to her, she said, “I'll carry this in ‘my’ wedding.” Eleven months later, she carried it in “our” wedding.

Africa and the Civil Rights Movement

After returning from Africa, In October, 1964, I addressed the BSU State Convention held in Monroe, Louisiana. Having matured into a commitment to respect the person and the rights of all people, having been part of a church which sang “red, and yellow, black and white,” and after

my experience in Africa, I was deeply committed to social and ethnic equality. In my speech, I addressed civil rights and racial equality, after which every one present avoided me.

I was never asked to speak in the state again, until 1994, thirty years later, when I was asked to address 500 community leaders about abortion in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I asked those present to raise their hands if they were for abortion: none did. I asked them to raise their hands if they were against abortion: all did. I added, "Well, we have that settled; let's talk about the blood brother, the fellow traveler, the co-laborer with the abortionist who is the bigot and the racially prejudiced. Through a one-hour address, I affirmed the equality of all men, women, boys and girls and encouraged all to embrace civil rights. This is all the result of my maturation at Northwestern.

Returning to Northwestern and The Long Purple Line

In May, 2015, Carolyn and I returned to Northwestern for our 50th Graduation Anniversary. This was the capstone of the Hollys and NSU. Unknown to Carolyn, four years before, I had arranged to endow a Distinguished Professorship in her name and in the fall of 2014 added a Scholarship in our mothers' names. Those endowments were announced at the 50th Anniversary.

When NSU President, Dr. Jim Henderson, called me on January 15, 2016 to notify me of my election to the NSU Long Purple Line, I was elated. After receiving the Distinguished Alumnus award from my school of medicine in 2012, I did not think anything could "top" that. Little did I realize that such an award from NSU would be so very significant to me. Carolyn and I arrived at NSC as children and we left as young adults. The course of our life was set at NSC. Our relationship which has lasted a life time was forged there. The connection between Carolyn's family and mine was woven at Northwestern.

I am honored and truly humbled to become one of the Long Purple Line. Yet, if the honor were accurate, it would be to Dr. and Mrs. James L. Holly, as absolutely nothing in my life, since I first kissed Carolyn one night in front of the NSU dining hall December 12, 1964, and our wedding day August 7, 1965, when I was 21 years old, has been accomplished without Carolyn's support, encouragement, collaboration and challenge. I have so much to be thankful to Carolyn and to Northwestern for, and now this honor is added to that debt. The Apostle Paul admonished us to "owe no man anything except a debt of love." My wife and I owe Northwestern a large debt of love. I owe my wife a debt of and for everything. I will spend my life hence forth continuing to try to repay a small part of that debt to both.

Before her death, Carolyn had known and learned to love my Grandmother who started the Long Purple Line for both Carolyn and me. It would have been wonderful if she could be with us today but she is alive in our memories as we only imagine a young women joining this line in 1918